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Pro Bono Attorney of the Year helps shred fat-cat stereotype

Jane Ann Morrison

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Cam Ferenbach is a \$350-an-hour attorney. He defends big businesses accused of racial and sexual discrimination. He works in a downtown high-rise, and his corner office looks out on a wondrous view of the Strip.

At first glance, he might seem like the kind of supercilious fat-cat attorney people love to hate.

Yet Ferenbach just won an award as the Pro Bono Attorney of the Year, honored by Clark County Legal Services for years of work providing free legal services to low-income Southern Nevadans.

In 2003, he provided more than \$18,000 worth of free legal time to people who could never afford an attorney.

'Every year, Cam has always been there for us, taking cases, recruiting lawyers,' said Lynn Etkins, coordinator for the Pro Bono Project. 'There are very few that are that compassionate.'

He's not alone. In 2003, more than 200 Clark County attorneys provided free legal help through the Pro Bono Project. Nine donated more than 100 hours of their time.

Ferenbach, 56, originally planned to be a legal aid lawyer.

However, when he graduated from Arizona State University College of Law in 1979, a friend asked him as a favor to interview with a Las Vegas law firm because few interviews had been arranged.

The friend said the firm was the largest in Nevada, was headed by a former governor and represented major companies.

'I told her it was the last place I'd ever want to work,' Ferenbach said. 'I wanted to represent the underdog and benefit people who need access to the legal system.'

But he interviewed and discovered the firm wasn't the monolith he expected. Founding partner and former Gov. Grant Sawyer, a man who proudly wore the mantle 'liberal Democrat,' supported Ferenbach's wishes to provide free legal help to the deserving. Goodbye, legal aid. Hello, Lionel Sawyer & Collins.

Sawyer even allowed Ferenbach to represent three or four prostitutes when the city

attorneys started using a ploy to settle cases with pleas but no jail time, which meant the prostitutes wouldn't get legal counsel. Instead, they started accumulating long criminal records.

Having hookers in the law firm's waiting room didn't thrill all of the partners, but soon the city changed its policy so the prostitutes began receiving legal counsel.

Take away hookers' rights and whose rights are next?

Ferenbach has fought with mobile home parks over eviction efforts and credit companies over false claims of bad credit history. It might not sound glamorous, but for those he helped, it made a difference to have an attorney.

He was a board member for Nevada Legal Services from 1986 to 1996, the year he became president of Clark County Legal Services. Currently, he is a board member of the State Bar of Nevada. He and his wife, Mary Francis, have two children, Emily, 16, and Danny, 9.

It's not like he needs extra work to keep busy.

Ferenbach's commitment to pro bono work hasn't faltered during his legal career, and he credits the feedback he receives. 'Those kinds of clients, most are appreciative,' he said. 'And access to justice is so critical for our system to work.'

Ferenbach issued a 'don't call me, call them' warning to potential pro bono clients. Cases need to first be screened by Clark County Legal Services, which can be reached at 386-1070. There is also a user-friendly Web site at clarkcountylegal.com which explains guidelines for legal services' cases.

Typical cases involve landlord-tenant disagreements, payday loan arguments, disputes with car dealers and credit companies, and family court issues, including representation for some abused and neglected children.

At the December luncheon honoring the pro bono attorneys, Ferenbach was unaware he was getting the top honor. He listened as Nevada Supreme Court Justice Nancy Becker talked about the winner but didn't pay close attention until she mentioned the winner had been the president of the Clark County Bar Association in 2002.

Yeah, that would be him.

'I was almost speechless,' said the normally talkative Ferenbach, who was stunned when he received a standing ovation from his peers.

Shakespeare was wrong. Let's not kill all the lawyers.